

Celebrating America's Youth



The Facts Are Positive



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Administration for Children and Families
Administration on Children, Youth and Families
Family and Youth Services Bureau



Celebrating America's youth: The facts are positive

Our society often overlooks young people's positive attitudes and contributions, focusing instead on problems and challenges they may face.¹

But in reality American youth are faring better than ever! The majority are moving successfully from childhood to adulthood. They are making this transition with the help and support of families, social institutions, communities, and friends.

- They are participating in community, volunteer, civic, religious, and extracurricular activities.
- They are succeeding academically.
- They are forming positive relationships with parents and family.
- They are choosing healthy behaviors.

The statistics in this brochure give hope that, with the right support and guidance, youth are on the path to achieve their full potential.

More youth are volunteering their services.

Adolescents who take part in community service or volunteer in political activities are more likely to continue having a strong work ethic as adults. Volunteering is also related to overall positive academic, psychological, and occupational outcomes.² These positive findings are highlighted in the following statistics:

- Volunteer rates among young people 15–25 years old are generally higher than they are among adults 26 and older: 40 percent of young people reported past-year volunteer activity.³
- More than three-quarters (76 percent) of high school seniors volunteered during the previous year. Rates for 8th and 10th graders are similar.³
- Rates of regular volunteering (defined as at least once a month) increased between 1991 and 2001: from 24 to 35 percent among 12th graders, from 27 to 29 percent among 10th graders, and from 26 to 28 percent among 8th graders.⁴
- Volunteer activity among 12th grade students continued to increase between 2000 and 2001: the percent who reported volunteering once a month or more increased from 32 to 35 percent.⁴

Most young people are engaged in extracurricular activities.

Young people who participate in extracurricular activities—whether athletic, musical, or artistic—generally make adjustments positively, perform better academically, and complete school successfully.¹ So the future looks bright, based on the following statistics.

Athletics: A majority of young people report participating in organized sports, an activity associated with increased levels of self-esteem and motivation, overall psychological well-being, and better body image.²

- Between 1991 and 2001, more than two-thirds (67 to 70 percent) of 8th graders participated on a school athletic team, as did nearly two-thirds (60 to 63 percent) of 10th graders.⁴
- During the last decade, girls increasingly participated in school sports. For example, among 10th grade girls, participation in school athletics increased from 52 percent in 1991 to 60 percent in 2001.⁴

School music or other performing arts: Many researchers have found a positive association between arts participation and various academic and social outcomes, such as improved school grades and a decrease in negative social behaviors.²

- In 2001, more than half (54 percent) of 8th graders, 41 percent of 10th graders, and 42 percent of 12th graders participated in school music or performing arts programs.⁴

Youth are engaged in civic and religious activities.

Civic engagement: Young people who participate in voting and other civic activities—like the ones included in the statistics below—are more likely to remain civically active as adults.

- Fifty percent of female and 47 percent of male 18–25-year-olds feel they can make a “great deal” or “some” difference in their communities, and 54 percent of females and 49 percent of males report that “voting is an important thing to do.”⁵
- Close to half (45 percent) of female and 40 percent of male 18–24-year-olds voted in the 2000 election.⁶

Religious activities: Religion plays an important role in the lives of many young people. Youth who attend religious services are more likely to volunteer in their communities, participate in student government, and play sports or exercise regularly.²

- In 2001, 44 percent of 8th graders and 40 percent of 10th graders attended religious services at least weekly.⁴
- Since the early 1990s, youth have increasingly reported that religion plays a very important part in their lives. For example, 29 percent of eighth graders said so in 1991; 34 percent said so in 2000.⁴



Young people are succeeding academically.

Teens' academic performance and educational attainment are related to how they will do economically later in life.¹ The statistics below are promising for

the future of America's youth:

- Average mathematics proficiency scores for eighth graders increased significantly (from 273 to 278) between 2000 and 2003. The largest gains came from students scoring in the bottom percentiles.⁷
- More than 90 percent of young people (16–19-year-olds) are either enrolled in school or employed, and 27 percent are both enrolled in school and employed.⁸
- Since 1971, high school completion rates have risen from 59 to 87 percent among non-Hispanic Blacks (25–29-year-olds)—narrowing the gap with non-Hispanic Whites from 23 percentage points in 1971 to 6 in 2001.⁹
- In 2000 and 2001, 87 percent of young adults (18–24 years old) completed high school.⁸
- In 2002, the percentage of young adults (25–29-year-olds) who attained a bachelor's degree or higher remained at an all-time high of 29 percent.⁸

- The percentage of high school graduates who had taken honors-level English courses increased from 29 percent in 1998 to 34 percent in 2000.⁸
- The percentage of high school graduates taking advanced mathematics, science, English, and foreign language courses increased dramatically between 1982 and 2000.⁸

Youth are forming positive relationships with parents and family.

Teens are more likely to maximize opportunities and avoid risks when parents are involved in their lives.¹⁰

- More than three-quarters (78 percent) of youth indicate that they turn to their parents for advice and guidance in times of need, according to a recent national survey conducted by the YMCA.¹¹ The survey also found that not having enough time with their parents is the top concern of young people.
- When asked who most influences their decisions about sex, teens say parents are more influential (45 percent) than friends (31 percent), teachers (6 percent), or the media (4 percent).¹²
- Nearly 6 in 10 teens (59 percent) say that when it comes to healthy, responsible relationships, their parents are their role models.¹²

Young people are choosing healthy behaviors.

- From 1991 to 1997 there was a 29-percent increase in the proportion of students choosing healthy behaviors over health-risk behaviors.¹³
- Between 1990 and 2001, the number of high school students who chose sexual abstinence increased from 46 to 54 percent.¹⁴
- A recent study concludes, “Teens express more cautious attitudes and values toward sex than is perhaps generally believed.” For example, 85 percent of teens agree that sex should only occur in a long-term, committed relationship.¹²
- The majority of high school seniors perceive a great risk of harm in regularly using any illicit drug (from 56 percent for regular marijuana use to 89 percent for regular heroin use).¹⁵
- Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of all high school seniors perceive a great risk in smoking one or more packs of cigarettes a day.¹⁵
- Between 1994 and 2002, the percentage of youth (16–24-year-olds) wearing seat belts rose from 53 to 69 percent.¹⁶



Celebrating America's youth: The Positive Youth Development approach

These positive statistics demonstrate that— with the support of States, communities, organizations, and families—young people are flourishing in their personal and community lives. They also reflect the Positive Youth Development approach promoted by the Family and Youth Services Bureau (FYSB). This approach recognizes that empowered young people need support, guidance, and opportunities during adolescence to develop self-assurance in four key areas: competence (being able to do something well), usefulness (having something to contribute), belonging (being a part of a community and having relationships with caring adults), and power (having control over one's future).

From promoting job prospects and skills to supporting educational aspirations and healthy lifestyles, FYSB increases youth's leadership capacity. FYSB leadership and staff have reached out to thousands of youth workers, policymakers, and others through conference speeches, special meetings, Positive Youth Development materials, and efforts such as the following:

- FYSB's Head Start Youth Initiative creates a unique Federal partnership: youth mentors participate in Head Start children's literacy activities, attend family night events and home visits, and design new classroom projects.
- With its research and demonstration program, FYSB encourages State and local collaboration to strengthen the Positive Youth Development approach in local communities or neighborhoods.

- The annual National Youth Summit showcases Federal, State, and local youth programs. Young people are Summit presenters, moderators, artists, musicians, photographers, and planners.¹⁷
- Youth serve on review panels for four of FYSB's major grant award programs: the Basic Center Program for Runaway and Homeless Youth, the Transitional Living Program for older youth, the Street Outreach Program, and the Mentoring Children of Prisoners Program.

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For more information on positive youth statistics and Positive Youth Development, please contact the National Clearinghouse on Families & Youth:

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